EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON BROADCASTING

by

STUART HALL

SP 4 20p.

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON BROADCASTING

"The External-Internal Dialectic in Broadcasting: Television's Double-Bind"

Stuart Hall
Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies
University of Birmingham

In Fourth Symposium On Broadcasting Policy, Feb. 1972
Ed. F.S. Badley, U. of Manchester, Dept. of Extra-Mural Studies,
pp. 91-105.

In this paper, I try to expand a proposition which seems to me obvious and true, but which is widely neglected and repressed. In Britain, the broadcasting institutions have a great deal of formal autonomy from the state and government: but their ultimate authority to broadcast derives from the state and, in the last instance, it is to the state that they are responsible. That part of the proposition is probably not contentious: but what I consider its necessary corollary probably is. The broadcasting institutions exercise a wide measure of editorial autonomy in their programmes: but ultimately they operate within the mode of reality of the state, and their programme content is, in the last instance, governed by the dominant ideological perspective and is oriented within its hegemony. What are usually understood as 'external influences on broadcasting' constitute in fact the everyday working context for broadcasting: the study of such specific 'influences' therefore provides a quite inadequate model for examining the mediations between broadcasting and power. In recent months the play of influences upon broadcasting has become more overt. But this has more to do with a shift in the context within which the broadcasters operate, and the shifting visibility of broadcasting as a social problem, than with a basic change in the status and position of broadcasting.

Where controversial issues are concerned, there are always distinct patterns and swings in the structure of public attention. This is the 'social visibility' or 'social history' of social problems. Broadcasting, like the other mass media, exhibits this pattern to a striking degree. The issue was first focussed in the setting of Germany in the 1930s. It concerned the use of propaganda to legitimate and win consent for fascism amongst the German people. The radio/fascism debate was reproduced with respect to the cinema, and has been repeated in television. In each phase, issues of the widest social and political significance have been focussed through - and displaced on to - the debate about the media. In essence, the 'German' debate was about the fragmentation of social institutions under the impact of fascism: that was a debate about fascism and 'mass society'. In the forties and fifties, media research was colonized within American social science. It concentrated on short-term effects, measurable behavioural influences of media on social life, employing a reduced model of 'influence': in theory, positivistic, in method, quantitative. But its significant findings - about the role of 'personal influence' or of 'cosmopolitans' and 'locals' - were also penetrated by a larger issue: was America a 'pluralist' society, and in so-called pluralist societies did regional, familial, neighbourhood and small-group networks provide effective 'countervailing forces' against the impact of the media? The broad tendency of this phase of reseach was to return an answer to this question in the form of a cautious 'yes'. That phase, too, is passing. With the break-up of the pluralist consensus, and the resumption of open societal conflict, the media have once again - in the the United States, and increasingly elsewhere - been placed squarely in the centre of controversy. Social scientific research has done something to refine our notions about the media's relation to society, but it has neither pacified public anxiety nor adequately put the problems which that relationship posed. The ambience of 'value-neutral' research has provided an opportunity for disguised ideoligical debate in non-ideological societies - but only at the cost of fatally repressing the intrinsic political

dimension of the problem.

Events have thus placed the media once more on the agenda. We are in the middle of yet another cycle of public discontent. The impact of this controversy on the position and morale of the broadcasters is all too visible. But the reasons for its re-emergence are not often clearly defined. I therefore offer a brief summary of the forces and trends, as I see them, which are transforming broadcasting's 'working context', and which have rendered the hidden constraints on broadcasting visible.

1. There is the highly monopolistic structure of modern communications systems, whether state, semi-state or commercial in form.

2. The bureaucratic character of the broadcasting institutions. Their size, complexity, self-recruiting features, institutional motives appear 'closed'. Especially where, as in Britain, the lines of executive influence are mediated by intervening 'buffer-state' organisations like the BBC or ITA, with widely autonomous powers; these institutions appear 'irresponsible'. Their relative autonomy veils and mystifies the structure of constraints. The 'logics' by which such institutions function are therefore only partly visible in their programmes and day-to-day operations.

3. The unilateral nature of modern broadcasting. Radio and television are essentially forms of one-way transmission, in which small professional elites speak to widely dispersed and heterogeneous audiences. Feedback (by complaints or switching off) is weak and ineffective. The favoured types of 'feedback' - audience reseach, viewing figures and Talkback-style programmes - serve the interests of broadcasters, not audiences. They enable the broadcasters to 'win consent' more effectively for their products in the public arena.

4. The growing anxiety about the media's power to influence opinion, form attitudes, undermine orthodoxies. A good deal of 'scape-goating' of the media is in evidence here. If Britain is indeed becoming morally more 'permissive', television may have played a part in selectively accelerating this process but cannnot itself be primarily responsible for such a shift in moral climate. Yet by giving instant visibility to such deeply structured trends, broadcasting draws the fire of critics on all sides to itself. Traditional research is of little help here. It measures short-term, direct influences, swift changes of hearts and minds. The public is concerned with real but more tangible processes: the media's role in shaping the secondary environment and in providing the essential contextual knowledge about the situations in which social action and conflict unfolds, their influence on the ethos in which public opinion crystalises and policy decisions are taken, their power to establish and sustain a limited range of prevailing definitions of problematic events: their capacity to transmit 'pictures of the world', action-images, scenarios of conflict. In highly segregated, socially differentiated societies, there can be little doubt that broadcasting does crucially transmit the essential knowledge about unfamilar situations and events to people who have literally no alternative access to them. What the general public knows about Ulster or Bangladesh it knows essentially from the media. What the public suspects is that such knowlege is not 'neutral' -

as Kenneth Burke has said, it is virtually impossible in social communication to identify social actors and name an action without also nominating an attitude towards them.

5. The special interest, and the discretionary power, of the elites - politicians, government, experts, institutional spokesmen, interest groups - to 'corner the market in favourable communications'. The growing practice of news management, the spread of the public relations or 'impression-management' industries, and the role of the image makers in politics are aspects of the same phenomenon.

6. The fear that the media are undermining social and moral conventions. This fear appears in the very moment of a widespread and rapid polarization in the moral-social consensus. There is a hidden political dimenson to this so-called 'moral' argument: the emergence of the undeground, the moral backlash it engendered and the accompanying mobilization of legal sanctions and social control are directly related to politics and the defence of the social order. In this domain, the media are assailed by both sides - by the moral entrepreneurs, who believe that they erode public authority and moral deference, and by the libertarians who believe the media provide the last bastion of bourgeois philistinism.

7. The pivotal role of the media in defining issues of national significnce on which opinion is divided. This includes such issues as the position of blacks in a white society, and the fighting of unpopular wars. We leave aside for the moment the question of whether the media have helped to make such wars unpopular in the first place.

8. The skewed structure of public access to the media. Access and visibility in the media exhibits a clearly defined social structure. The media favours power groups, accredited elite witnesses, institutional spokesmen, experts, as against 'out-groups' - the socially dispossessed or disorganised, the deviant, ethnic minorities, working-class groups, etc. When the latter groups appear, they systematically tend to have their problems defined for them. They are always carefully 'balanced out'.

9. The special sensitivity of the media when such groupings become politically organized and articulate. It is in the handling of student radicalism and protest, mass demonstrations, 'black power' groups, urban insurgency, radical community action, claimant unions, women's and 'gay' liberation, unofficial strikes etc. that the ideological structure of the media is most clearly delineated.

10. The media's role in providing contextual knowledge of events outside our own society. In complex societies, groups depend more on the media for images and stereotypes of the life situation of 'others'. Similarly, we depend on the fitful coverage and ethno-centred 'eye' of the media for our knowledge about all non-Western European and non-North American societies. Our deep ignorance about the context of Latin American or Chinese societies are two obvious examples.

In short, the specific charges of influence on and bias in the media have crystallized within a rapidly changing context. There has been a steady

polarization in the political and moral consensus. The regulated political conflict between the institutionalized parties of 'right' and 'left' (whether Conservative-Labour, Christian-Democrat/Social Democrat or Republican-Democrat) has been challenged and 'transcended' by the emergence of extra-parliamentary opositional politics. Such groupings challenge, not the allocation of 'goods' (economic, social, moral) within the system, but the 'rules of the game' itself. In moral and social attitudes, the gentle argument between the conventional (Southend-on-Sea) and the sophisticates (NW3) has been eroded by a sustained moral-social libertarianism, expressed in the formation of youth culture, the flowering of 'deviant' subcultures, the articulation of a distinctive underground with its counter-societies. Internationally, the armed truce of the post-war period, watched over by the East-West nuclear stalemate, has been ruptured by the resumption of militant, often armed, liberation struggles. These emergent forces have whittled away the framework of consensual institutions, values and beliefs which sustains the social order, and challenged the taken-for-granted 'rules' which neutralised social conflict and made the political-moral order legitimate. Underneath this, there is the amorphous but persistent ground-swell, crystallizing in the form of a growth in the demand for greater participation and control over the decisions which affect their lives by groups with little or no access to power. In short, the debate about broadcasting arises as a product of these seismic shifts in its taken-for-granted context. This debate provides the prism for a much more general social crisis whose character and lines of conflict remain confused and indistinct. The shift in the location of conflict, and the erosion of the consensus may certainly have made the direct pressures on broadcasting more visible and overt. But, in my view, what above all it has revealed - by making it problematic - is the contexts of contraints within which, regularly, day-by-day, broadcasting functions in our society.

My argument is that the visible play of 'external influences' on broadcasting only becomes overt when the underlying structure of ideological and institutional constraints within which broadcasting operates has fragmented. So long as the sphere of political reality, for example, is defined within the boundaries of a regulated conflict between the two major political parties, the nature of 'controversy' in broadcasting remains unproblematic. The point is clearly demonstrated in Mr. Julian Critchley's recent Conservative Political Centre pamphlet Counsel For Broadcasting. Replying to the argument put forward by Mr. Denis Forman, the managing director of Granada, that "television must give full voice to those who wish to change the constitutional basis of the country as well as those who defend it", Mr. Critchley commented: "The problem is not one of striking a balance between the Conservative and Labour Parties, it is one of self-defence in the face of an attack upon the liberal consensus itself". The broadcasting institutions are clearly not committed to either of the two parties. Indeed, they would come under direct fire if they did not exhibit a strict balance in the distribution of access between the parties. But, in Mr. Critchley's view, and I believe rightly, broadcasting is understood to be, and understands itself to be, committed to "the liberal consensus itself". Similarly, though I hold no brief for her point of view, Mrs. Whitehouse and the other moral entrepreneurs seem to me quite corrct to pose the questions, - by what right of legitimacy, if not by God, Queen, Country, and the established moral conventions, is broadcasting held in place?

Again, broadcasting may hold no specific views on the question of premarital sex, but it has up to the present been committed to some vaguely defined 'moral consensus itself' on such issues, and its powers and licence to deviate from this commitment can ultimately only be sanctioned by referring outside of itself - by its judgement that, indeed, the moral consensus on such matters is changing. It seems that external pressures, whether from government, politicians, the state, vested interest groups, moral entrepreneurs, emerge openly and with rampant force - and the broadcasters are specially vulnerable to them - precisely because the 'invisible hand' of consensus on these issues no longer provides a framework of legitimacy, a routinized structure of constraints and limits, for the broadcaster. It is thus in moments of polarization and conflict that broadcasting most openly reveals what otherwise is covert, tacit, taken-for-granted: its hidden but pervasive symbiotic relation to power and to the dominant ideologies. We say 'power and the dominant ideologies' rather than money and the profit motive because, although television has, since the ending of monopoly, provided a 'frontier province' for the crudest commercial calculations, the role of broadcasting in reproducing the power relations and ideological structure of society appears to me far more central an issue than its incidental financial kickbacks. The fact that the moral entrepreneurs have directed their attacks almost exclusively at the BBC is a sign, not only that certain forms of moral righteousness cohabit more easily with the open commercial imperatives of ITV than it does with the disintegrating paternalism of the BBC, but also of the absolute centrality of the power-ideology-broadcasting nexus in the current situation.

If this argument is correct, then the question of 'external influences' is a thoroughly inadequate way of framing the problem. It is predicated on a model of broadccasting which takes at face value its form and editorial autonomy: external influences are then seen as illigitimately encroaching upon this area of freedom. I do not mean to deny the escalation in the specific instances of pressure, influence and censorship to which the broadcasters have been subject in recent months. Nor do I mean to deny the 'relative autonomy' of broadcasting in its day-to-day practice. Nevertheless, the real relationship between broadcasting, power and ideology is thoroughly mystified by such a model. One difficulty - it is the product of 'the liberal ideology itself' - is that we have few ways of understanding how power and influence flow, how relative institutional integration is accomplished, in societies which are of the formal democratic type. Institutions are conceived, either as state controlled and dominated, in which case they clearly belong within the complex of power: or they are free and autonomous, and are subject to illegitimate pressure and influence from extrinsic sources. Neither view seems to me tenable. We cannot from such a model predict or comprehend the specific areas of conjuncture and disjuncture which arise between different institutions in civil society. Thus, we would find it impossible to account for the fact that, on a series of specific occasions in recent months, the broadcasters have correctly asserted their editorial independence against clear political pressure (Yesterday's Men and The Question of Ulster are two instances): and yet at the same time account for the mutal adjustments, the reciprocity of interests and definitions, occurring from day-to-day in all the central domains of broacasting,

between broadcasting and the institutions of power. One might put the question in a sharp, concrete form. Clearly the recent coverage of affairs in Northern Ireland has been subject to massive internal watchfulness and external constraint. Specifically, this has operated with respect to the broadccasters' right to interview representative spokesmen of the IRA. Here, clearly, the broadcaster has been both subject to 'external influence and pressure', and to widespread internal institutional self-censorship. But, had no specific representations on the issue been made to the broadcasters, can one envisage a situation in which, systematically, the broadcasters of their own 'free' accord gave precedence in their current affairs coverage to the 'definition of the Northern Ireland situation' proposed by the IRA and its sympathisers? There seems to me only one, distant but just conceivable contingency in which such a practice could ever become widesprad within the organizations: that is (as at the time of Suez) if opinion were to crystallize so powerfully against Government policies that the broadcasters could legitimate their deviant practices by referring to some external authority alternative to that of the state itself: namely, 'public opinion'. Otherwise, whether the state intervenes directly to censor broadccasting's coverage of Ulster or not, the prevailing tendency of the organizations has been to orient themselves within the dominant definition of the situation. The broadcasters' decision not to interview IRA spokesmen is the 'free' reproduction, within the symbolic content of their programmes, of the state's definition of the IRA as an 'illegal organization'; it is a mirror reflection and amplification of the decision, to which at present both political parties subscribe, that the IRA do not constitute a legitimate political agency in the Ulster situation - they are not within the definition of 'parties' from which a bargain or settlement might emerge.

To account for such a fact we require, neither a simple 'conspiracy theory' nor a simple 'freedom-and-pressures' model, but rather the model of a society and its major institutions as a "complex formation structured in dominance": a model which identifies the specificity of the different institutions within the complex of power and ideology, locates their 'relative autonomy', includes the possibility of conflict and contradictory movements between them, while retaining the notion of central areas of convergence, of conjuncture - the 'over-determinations' of power.

In what follows, I propose to elaborate this model seriously, against simpler, but more misleading models, now frequently advanced both by the right and the left. Thus Mr.Critchley, in the pamphlet previously quoted, tries to account for what he calls "This taste for agit-prop" in the media, in part, in terms of "the recruitment of people dissatisfied with society as they find it." "'Television man' has always been of the Left - in a trendy if not in an ideological sense". It is common to find much the same proposition, in reverse, advanced by critics of broadcasting from the left. I do not believe them. Television certainly recruits from an extremely narrow social band, and such men are powerfully socialised into the ethos and morale of the broadcasting institutions. But I do not believe that television's built-in biases can be accounted for in terms of the overt political inclinations - to left or right - of its individual practitioners. Indeed, what is far more significant is the way quite different kinds and conditions of men are systematically constrained to handle the variety of news and accounts which they process daily within the

framework of a limited set of interpretations. Nor do I believe that the broadcasters are systematically censored and pressured from extrinic sources except in limited and largely exceptional cases. Just as it is impossible to 'net' the influence of advertising in the press in terms of the number of times advertisers have explicitly threatened editors with the withdrawal of their custom, so it is impossible to 'net' the real structure of interests in television or radio in terms of direct representations by Ministers to the Director-General. Certainly there are issues and areas where the system of scrutiny is very precise - and it is important to identify where and what these are. But the 'relative autonomy' of the broadcasting institutions is not a mere 'cover': it is, I believe, central to the way power and ideology are mediated in societies like ours.

The most sensitive area precisely arises where the social order itself is called into question. Where issues of 'public order', 'national security', 'law and order', or 'overriding national interest' are concerned, especially if linked with tactics defined as 'violent', 'confrontationist', or 'illegal', the constraints on broadcasting operate more tightly. There will be more specific instances of pressure, censorship and influence exerted in this area, because these represent the outer limits of tolerance in the system itself. Here, the rules of the game are being called into question. Thus the pattern of external pressure on the broadcasters with respect to Ulster has steadily increased as the political situation there moved from one of 'civil rights' (tolerable-borderline) to civil insurrection (intolerable). Broadcasting here is no different from other institutions in the state where open social control and repressive action is taken only as a last resort, when the institutionalised mechanisms for containing and restraining conflict have broken down. But over the whole range of issues and topics, broadcasting operates its own limits and constraints, within the state's overall definition of socio-political reality, as semi-autonomous, self-regulating institutions.

Broadcasting accommodates itself to the power-ideology nexus by way of a number of crucial intervening concepts. These concepts mediate the relationship of the broadcasters to power. They provide the structure of legitimations which permit the broadcasters to exercise a substantial measure of editorial and day-to-day control without contravening the overall hegemony. At the same time, it is essential to recognise that this orientation of broadcasting within the hegemonic ideology is not a perfectly regulated, fully integrated one-dimensional system. Modern systems of broadcasting, as Enzensberger has recently argued, are of necessity 'leaky systems'. They are subject to the overall determinations of power, but their day-to-day operations cannot be fully prescribed. For one thing, the broadcasting institutions are both too powerful and too complex to be marshalled in this way. "The possibility of total control of such a system at a central point", Enzensberger notes,"belongs not to the future but to the past ...Interference can penetrate the leaky nexus of the media, spreading and multiplying there with the utmost speed by resonance". This is not simply because the operation of day-to-day surveillance is too difficult to mount. The media are by nature oriented to the news: they are drawn to events which are dramatic, controversial, a-typical. Their commitment to communication in a competititive newsmarket makes them extremely sensitive to underlying trends and movements which have not yet fully crystallized but which might contain portents for the future. There

are, thus, many reasons, intrinsic to the nature of mass communications systems as such which draw them, inexorably, into the danger zones, which encourage them to worry away at movements and issues which disrupt the even tenor of social life, in which the seeds of future controversy and discontents are sewn. For this, and other reasons which we shall come to presently, the media, whose sphere of operations is crucially that of ideology, do not simply reproduce the hegemonic ideology, they reproduce the ruling ideology precisely in all its contradictions. The ruling classes which hold power in the state and other institutions of civil society can act directly, by law, decree and ultimately force, in the domain of power and social control, but they can only act indirectly, via the diffused institutions of concensus, in the ideological sphere. In situations where the forces of conflict are rapidly polarizing, the institutions which operate in the sphere of ideology thus themselves become what Althusser has called "not only the stake, but also the site of class struggle".

We come now to the central concepts which mediate broadcasting's relationship to the power-ideology complex. They are: balance, impartiality, ojectivity, professionalism and consensus.

Balance: Both broadcasting institutions are required to operate a system of 'balance' between conflicting interests and viewpoints. Until recently, producers were expected to provide 'balance' within single programmes - and whenever a topic is controversial this ground-rule is more strictly applied. Elsewhere, it has come to be more liberally interpreted - 'balance over a reasonable period of time'. The broadcasters are thus required to recognize that conflicts of interest and opinion exist. Indeed, because controversy is topical and makes 'good, lively broadcasting', controversial programmes flood the screen. They always contain more than one viewpoint. Thus broadcasting appears as the very reverse of monolithic or uni-vocal - as precisely, open, democractic and controversial. Yet 'balance' is crucially exercised within an overall framework of assumptions about the distribution of political power: the conflict here is scrupulously regulated. A debate between Labour and Conservative spokesmen - an area of 'balance' subject both to executive and informal sanctions - is itself framed by agreements, set elsewhere but reproduced in the studio, in television's presentational devices and in its very discourse. Political 'balance' operates essentially between the legitimate mass parties in the parliamentary system. 'Balance' becomes trickier when groups outside the consensus participate, since the grounds of conflict then become the terrain of political legitimacy itself - an issue on which Labour and Conservative spokesmen stand together, against the others. In this way television does not favour one point of view, but it does favour - and reproduce - one definition of politics: by definition it excludes, represses or neutralizes other definitions. We can now better understand what one news commentator meant when he observed, a propos the withdrawl of opposition MPs from Stormont, that both Whitehall and Stormont were anxious to bring them "back into politics". The rent strikes, civil defence marches and other actions were in that instant delegitimated as political acts. Television and radio do not, therefore, offer 'only one point of view'. But by operating balance within a given structure, television tacitly maintains the prevailing definition of the political order. That is, in one and the same moment, it expresses and contains

conflict. It reproduces unwittingly the structure of institutionalised class conflict on which the system depends. It thereby legitimates the prevailing structure of interests, while scrupulously observing 'balance between the parties'. It also, incidentally, offers a favourable image of the system as a system, precisely, 'open to conflict' and to alternative 'points of view'. It is this last twist which keeps the structure flexible and credible.

Impartiality: Impartiality defines the way broadcasters negotiate situations of conflict from within. Broadcasters are not supposed to express personal opinions on controversial issues: they are committed to a rigorous impartiality between the conflicting parties. Experienced interviewers know precisely the angle at which they must lean down-wind for Mr. Heath, up-wind for Mr. Wilson, in order to construct an impression of fierce impartiality: the art of political management of the studio situation is one of the current-affairs broadcaster's first professional skills. In practice, of course, all broadcasters have views. The working compromise is to insist that the broadcaster must be the last person, if at all, to express a view. But as all good producers know, there is more than one way of cutting a programme. Producers have become extremely skilled at producing 'balanced' studio teams - the infinite calculations as to how many Bernadette Devlins make an Ian Paisly is one of those editorial acts which all producers are skilled at intuiting. Yet the practice of impartiality has several inescapable consequences. (1) It leads broadcasting into the impasse of a false symmetry of issues. All controversial questions must have two sides, and the two sides are usually given a rough equality in weight. Responsibility is shared out between the parties: each side receives a measure of praise or censure. This symmetry of oppositions is a formal balance: it has little or no relevance to the quite unequal relative weights of the case for each side in the real world. If the workman asserts that he is being poisoned by the effluence from a noxious plant, the chairman must be wheeled in to say that all possible precautions are now being taken... This symmetrical alignment of arguments may ensure the broadcaster's impartiality, but it hardly advances the truth. Opposition has been neutralised in this manoeuvre: the political level and the class content of the conflict has been

suppressed. (2) Impartiality as a practice gives the broadcaster/presenter a built-in interest in compromise, in conflict-resolution. It commits him to the pragmatic view of politics. His only way of intervening actively in a controversy is to act, in the studio, the shadow-role of the compromiser, the middle-man. His only legitimate interventions can be to salvage some 'lowest common denominator' of a 'package' or bargain from the deeply held, but opposing positions before him. All conflicts thus become translated into the language of 'compromise': all failures to compromise are signs either of 'intransigence', 'extremism' or 'failures in communication'. The other way of neutralising conflict is to assert some 'over-riding' interest which subordinates the conflicting parties. Thus all broadcasters are safe in asserting that Britain's perilous economic position over-rides all industrial conflict, even if the strikers have 'a good case'. The programme presenter, face to face with a group of angry Ulster Protestants, can put a 'Catholic' case - but it will not be a Catholic 'civil rights' or IRA case; it will be one which asks for some 'gesture of reconciliation' so

as to enable Catholic representatives to 'come to the bargaining table'.

(3) This stake of the broadcaster in conflict-resolution has the function of legitimating those elements in a conflict which are 'realistic' - which can be abstracted from a general case and built in to a 'package'. The case which is intrinsically not amenable to this process is, clearly, 'unrealistic' - and hence 'unreasonable'. Thus the three wise men in The Question of Ulster could not deal with Bernadette Devlin's evidence, since it was inserted into a class analysis of the Northern Ireland situation, and defied trivialization in terms of producing the elements for a 'workable compromise'. (4) Via impartiality, broadcasting is thus raised above the conflicts which it treats. It seems to stand outside the real play of interests on which it reports and comments. The men and women who produce programmes are real social individuals in the midst of the conflicts which they report. But this 'subjective' dimension is repressed in the 'objectivity' of the programme. The programmes they produce are outside those conflicts - they reflect on and judge them, but they do not participate in them. As a recent pamphlet on Television and the State observes, "the identifications contained in programmes gain a mysterious validity as they are put forward as being the product of an analytical rationality from outside the society and separate from society and class conflict rather than as the product of a dialectic rationality which includes an understanding and knowledge of the involvements from where the 'truth' of the programme is created".

This tendency of broadcasting to stand above conflict and judge it impartially is especially damaging for the viewer, who is encouraged to identify with the presenter, and who thus comes to see himself as a neutral and dispassionate party to a partisan and impassioned struggle: the disinvolved spectator before the spectacle of conflict.

Objectivity: If the broadcaster is required to be impartial between witnesses, he is also enjoined to be 'objective' before 'the facts'. But objectivity, like impartiality, is an operational fiction. All filming and editing is the manipulation of raw data: selectively perceived, interpreted, signified. Television cannot capture 'the whole' of any event: the idea that it offers a 'pure' transcription of reality, a neutrality of the camera before the facts, is an illusion, a utopia. All filmed accounts of reality are selective. All edited or manipulated symbolic reality is impregnated with values, viewpoints, implicit theorisings, common-sense assumptions. The choice to film this aspect of an event rather than that is subject to criteria other than those embedded in 'the material itself': this aspect rather than that is significant, shows something special, out-of-the-ordinary, unexpected, typical... Each of those notions are operating against a taken-for-granted set of understandings and only have meaning within that context. Each decision to link this piece of film with that, to create a discourse out of the disparate fragments of edited material, makes sense only within a logic of exposition. The identifications of social actors, their projects in the world, are accomplished against the prevailing schemes of interpretation which we regularly but tacitly employ for the recognition and decoding of social scenes: they partake of the stock of social knowledge at hand which men employ to make sense of their world and events in it. Such a stock of knowledge is not a 'neutral structure' - it is shot through with previously

sedimented social meanings. The illusion of 'reality', of verisimilitude, indeed, depends on such contexts of meaning, such background schemes of recognition and interpretation, for its construction. How 'objective' is a clip from a miner's picket line used in a news actuality or current affairs documentary programme? The images we see are real enough: and no one doubts that the cameraman and reporter were here, saw it happen, are trying to show it 'as it is'. Yet the brief extract of this foreground event (denoted) is an enormously compressed item of information, rich in connotations. It only has meaning for us within its multiple contexts: the picket (from the viewpoint of the strikers) as an index of their power to hold the line while the strike continues; the picket (from the viewpoint of the Coal Board) as an index of the strength and effectiveness of rank-and-file resistance; the picket (from the viewpoint of the government) as an element which might contribute to the defeat of their wages policy; the picket (from the political viewpoint) as an index of escalating class conflict; the picket (from the viewpoint of the police) as a problem in the policing of class conflict, and so on. Whether the item is accompanied by commentary or not, whether it provides the 'actuality' basis for a studio discussion or not, its meaning lies in its indexical significance within the relevant context of meanings: and we decode its significance - it cannot literally be 'read off' the denoted images themselves - in terms of these contexts of awareness, in terms of the connotative power of the 'message'. The different logics of interpretation within which this objectively presented item makes sense in a public discourse are not neutral networks of meaning, and no broadcast programme can offer such an item without situating it within one or other of those logics.

Professionalism: All professionals generate their own distinctive ideologies and routines. But the growth of professionalism in broadcasting seems to have another function - essentially that of a defensive barrier which insulates the broadcaster from the contending forces which play across any programme-making in a sensitive area. It is often a species of professional retreatism, a technique of neutralisation. By converting issues of substance into a technical idiom, and by making himself responsible primarily for the technical competence with which the programme is executed, the producer raises himself above the problematic content of the issues he presents. What concerns him is identifying the elements of 'good television': cutting and editing with professional finish; the smooth management of transitions within the studio or between the programme elements; 'good pictures', full of incident and drama, etc. Such a semi-technical language insulates the producer and the programme from the overall editorial decisions, from the calculations of balance, from the disputed issues at hand. He relies on them, as an intervening structure of routines, to enable him to 'get on with the job of broadcasting'. The most pervasive of these semi-technical structures is that of news values itself. The media journalist, like his counterpart in the press, 'knows a good news story when he smells one': but few can define what criteria are integrated within this notion. 'News values' are, however, a man-made, value-loaded system of relevancies. Such a system has great practical use, since it enables the editor to get his work done, under the condition of heavily pressured schedules, without reference back to first principles. But the idea that such sedimented social knowledge is neutral - a set of technical protocols only - is an illusion.

Consensus: Consensus may be defined as the 'lowest common denominator' in the values and beliefs which are widely shared amongst the population of a society. It provides the basis of continuity and fundamental agreement in common social life. 'The consensus' is the structure of common-sense ideology and beliefs in the public at large. In formal democracies, a great deal of what holds the social order together consists of those tacit, shared agreements about fundamental issues embedded at the level of 'common sense ideology', rather than what is formally written down in constitutional protocols and documents. 'The consensus' on any specific issue is however extremely fluid, and difficult to define. The opinions of very few individuals will coincide exactly with it. Yet, without the notion that some shared bargain or compromise has been reached 'on fundamentals' it would be difficult either to govern or to broadcast in formal democratic societies. The 'consensus' is what defends us against Hobbes' 'war of all against all'. Perhaps its most important element is the consensus that a consensus exists. In modern, complex bureaucratic class-societies, consensus plays the role which 'public opinion' was cast for in ideal democratic theory. In practice, since the majority have little real, day-to-day access to decisions and information, common-sense ideolgoies are usually a composite reflection of the dominant ideologies, operating at a passive and diffused level in society. For all practical purposes, such modern democracies recognise that the coalition of classes which wields power, crucially forms and structures but it activates the whole mental environmnent in which decisions are made and from which policies flow. Yet ultimately, in formal democracies, the system is legitimated as one operating by 'consent' rather than by force or violence because it is, in some intangible way, responsible to 'public opinion' - the consensus.

Though 'the consensus' is extremely difficult to locate, its existence also underwrites and guarantees the broadcaster in his day-to-day functions. His sense of 'the state of play' in public opinion provides a sort of warrant for his performance. It offers him a rough-and-ready way of referring himself to 'what people in general are thinking and feeling about an issue'. He is not obliged to reproduce the consensus, as he understands it perfectly: and indeed, since groups which differ in class position and in power and status occupy different ends of this nebulous construct and define it differently, he cannot help but infringe 'the consensus' somewhere everytime he broadcasts. Still the consensus provides him with an outer horizon, a set of boudaries to 'what is normal, expected, understood, taken-for-granted', which he systematically offends against at his peril. In formal democracies, though power is in fact centralised within the elites, the elites gain legitimacy by this continous process of 'mentally referring themselves' to the public at large. It is my impression that in their everyday professional practice, broadcasters are more consistently regulated by their sense of their audience than by any single other source. In many areas of broadcasting, though the outer limits of public acceptability are impossible to define, the structure of 'shared agreements' which the broadcaster can posit for himself is flexible enough to authenticate his practice. When real conflicts of interest arise, the broadcasting institutions will often employ a reference to the consensus - to changing pubic feeling on an issue, to what 'the great mass of the British public feels' - as an alternative source of legitimacy, an alternative court of appeal, to that of the established sources.

But, as we have noted, the consensus is in fact an extremely fluid and ambivalent structure, at best. In practice, the agencies of government and control, while responsible in some formal sense to the people/the electorate/public opinion/the audience are, for that very reason, driven to treat the area of consenus as an arena in which they win consent for or assent to their actions and policies, their definitions and outlooks. In class societies which are also formal democracies, the structures of democratic representation and opinion are structures to be negotiated in the interest of power. The elites are in a powerful position to win assent in this way: (a) because they play a dominant role in crystallizing issues, (b) because they provide the material and information which support their preferred interpretations, (c) because they can rely on the disorganised state of public knowledge and feeling to provide, by inertia, a sort of tacit agreement to let the existing state of affairs continue. We are thus in the highly paradoxical situation, whereby the elites of power constantly invoke, as a legitimation for their actions, a consensus which they themselves have powerfully pre-structured. Thus the process of opinion formation and attitude crystallization is, like so many of the other processes we have been discussing, a process "structured in dominance". We can now understand why broadcasting itself stands in such a pivotal and ambiguous position. For, in such complex bureaucratic class-societies, the media and the dominant institutions of communication and consciousness-formation are themselves the primary source of attitudes and knowledge within which public opinion crystallizes, and the primary channels between the hegemonic classes and the audience. At the same time, as the rift in the moral-political consensus in the society widens, the consensus ceases to provide the broadcaster with a built-in ideological compass, an alternative source of legitimation. The ruling elites thus have a direct interest in monopolising the channels for consensus-formation for their preferred accounts and interpretations, thereby extending their hegemony: they also have a vested interest in ensuring that, when left to their own devices, the media will themselves reproduce, on their behalf, the tentative structure of agreement which favours their hegemony. In such moments, the media themselves become the site for the elaboration of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideologies and the terrain of societal and class conflict at the ideological level. Both television's functions are locked into this process: those occasions when it elaborates interpretations and accounts of the world on its own behalf, and those many ocassions when, via the skewed structures of access, it is obliged to reproduce, and validate the status or accredited witnesses, whose views it is obliged to attend and defer to, and whose statements 'in other places' (in parliament, in conferences, in boardrooms, in the courts, etc.) it is required to transmit. The media cannot long retain their credibility with the public without giving some access to witnesses and accounts which lie outside the consensus: it would not have dared to broadcast to the nation on the eve of the Newry march without at least one interview with Kevin Boyle, the Civil Rights organiser. But the moment it does so, it immediately endangers itself with its critics, who attack broadcasting for unwittingly 'tipping the balance of public feeling' against the political order. It opens itself to the strategies of both sides which are struggling to win a hearing for their interpretation in order to redefine the situations in which they are acting in a more favourable way. This is broadcasting's vicious double-bind.

APPENDIX A

(These notes deal briefly with some points not fully covered in the paper, raised in discussion at the Manchester University Graduate/Staff seminar)

Note I : Institutional Motives:

The paper deals too breifly with the institutional motives of the broadcasting institutions to survive, as a source of constraints. This is neglected partly because it is more fully dealt with in Anthony Smith's paper, though I think he accords this level too high a position. But the application of internal editorial and 'controller' constraints clearly does reflect the interest which the institutions have - the BBC especially - in their own survival. They must be seen to be able to control their own mavericks in order to substantiate their claims to editorial autonomy. This is partly because broadcasting is itself a 'power in the land', and seeks to preserve this position. It is partly because all complex organisations regulate themselves internally. But it is of special importance in broadcasting because of the tricky political climate in which they operate. Thus the BBC knows it has many enemies in government; it has had to struggle to convince its political masters that it is in competition with ITV, a majority communiations channel: it needs to retain its politcal credibility and its informal access to political circles: it needs to defend its general reputation in order to secure the licence fee, get more money for its own operations, and, when the Charter is reviewed, make sure that no further inroads are made into its province. The creation of the 'Three Wise Men' as a court of appeal, set up by the BBC itself, is a way of forestalling, from inside what might be a more dangerous form of scrutiny if imposed by legislation in 1976 or earlier. Thus, many editorial constraints are managed by the BBC, and passed down the hierarchy, in defence, ultimately, of the position of the institution as such. They are diplomatic decisions. Similarly, producers and controllers know that, generally, the BBC is undergoing a difficult patch, and don't want to endanger the Corporation by promoting yet another public row. Thus they censor themselves, steer away from tricky subjects, find alternative ways of handling the subject, 'for the sake of the Corp'. Anthony Smith's paper is particularly good on the way producers and staff generally are sensitive to these 'pervasive moods' and to the 'climate' at the centre of the organisational web. The renewal of contracts serves the same function for ITV.

Note II : "Reproducing The Dominant Ideology With All Its Contradictions"

We argue that broadcasting does not simply 'reproduce the dominant ideology' but reproduces that ideology and its contradictions. We suggest some pragmatic reasons for this - the media are 'leaky systems', some alternatives do get through, 'balance' commits them to 'more than one point of view', their news orientations predisposes them to go to the danger zones, etc. But, theoretically, why is this process one of 'reproduction in its contradictions'. Are the contradictions reproduced inherent within the dominant ideology? Not necessarily. But something within the dominant ideology promotes this 'reproduction in contradiction'. This is because the dominant ideology itself is (a) a liberal ideology (b) in a system

which is formally democratic. Thus, officially, there are many individuals and groups contending for power and interest, and these must, by definition, be plural: this opens the door to 'more than one point of view' - the idea of 'balance' is a decidedly liberal notion. Also, since the ultimate result must be legitimated by 'public consent' (however vague), the liberal ideology operates via the consensus, which is to broadcasting and administration what the electorate and the vote is to the parliamentary system. The 'democratic component' is an implicit element of contradiction within the dominant (liberal) ideology. But just as in the liberal-political ideology there is, ideally, 'one man one vote', but in reality a continuation of class hegemony: so, in the ideological sphere, there is, formally, 'balance' and 'impartiality', but in reality the dominance of 'prevailing definitions and interpretations'. It is important to say that this contradiction within the dominant ideology represents, at the ideological level, real previously-won concessions - the price the dominant ideology pays for its continuing hegemony: the vote, universal suffrage, parliamentary representation, the legalisation of unions and the right to strike, the ending of monarchical or aristocratic rule, the welfare state, etc.). The 'liberal ideology' is the consensus philosophy of a society, not without conflict, but with conflict regulated by norms which do not disturb the fundamental agreements. A society of regulated conflicts (and ideologies), 'structured in dominance'.

Note III : The Level of Signification:

If the reproduction of the dominant ideology were free and uncontested - if nothing else 'got through' - then the study of the style, technique, forms, studio presentations etc. would be simply a study, at the micro-level, of the dominant structures. But if, as argued above, the reproduction is of an ideology and its contradictions, then the level of significations (i.e. style, technique, forms, content, etc.) is a crucial level of analysis, with a 'relative autonomy' of its own, since, in any instance, the outcome of an encounter in which several contestants are present cannot be fully predicted: in this area, significant battles to win a hearing for alternative points of view can, sometimes, be won: the management of such conflictful situations has to be done in situ, and presenters can lose their grip on the situation, though they rarely do (because they have the ultimate signifying power of defining the events, and are the principal managers of the encounters): and there are also crucial areas where the definitions and identifications have to be negotiated. This seems to be the distinction between an ethnomethodological and a radical symbolic interactionist approach, at the level of the micro-study of television. For ethnomethodology takes the overall social order for granted: each encounter is thus a reproduction, at the level of meaning construction and the situation, of a given social order, which remains essentially unaffected by these transactions. (Thus a strict Garfinkel analysis of a t.v. programme can be squared with a Parsonian view of the integrated social order). Goffman seems to hold a position close to this, though there are many more 'discrepancies' allowed for between the level of 'social order' and the level of the 'construction of social order in face-to-face situations'. Becker and others, however, can be pushed towards a position where the outcome of transactions (interactional, symbolic) at the situational level can affect the on-going reproduction of society at the 'social order' level. Hence situations, while 'structured

in dominance' (i.e.showing a systematic tendency to reproduce the hegemony of dominant defintions of the situation) are not determined by it. Conflict and contradiction, therefore, as well as consensus and social order can be produced at the micro-level. Each encounter, therefore, puts the 'structure in dominance' to the test: and the differing definitions of situation must struggle for dominance, win assent for their outlook against others, try to amplify definitions so as to favour the dominant perspective, etc. The level of signification, is, therefore, a privileged level with 'relative autonomy': but it is neither fully determined by larger structures, nor free of them. The techniques which permit a broadcaster to define an ambiguous situation (e.g. sit-in) as 'violent', and thus win the consensus (which is against violence), are a critical area of 'negotiation of symbolic reality'.

APPENDIX B

Rough Model For A Power-Ideology Game

Activities	Actors	Consensus	Access
electoral activities party-political activities institutional interests (business) special interest groups (doctors)	Govt/State Parties Business	Strong	guaranteed
established pressure groups	Institutional		strong claims
new pressure groups grass roots activities wage negotiations strikes (official)	spokesmen moral entrepreneurs unions/managers unions/business/Govt	Contested	right of reply
protest meetings peaceful demonstrations community action	political organisers	Negotiable	handle with care
demos with confrontation sit-ins and occupations direct action tenants strikes	militants extremists		
unofficial strikes sporadic terrorism urban riot	instigators hooligans	Against	denied access
urban insurgency	bombers and gunmen		

1. Rank programmes and programme techniques on this grid.

2. Dichotomise by mode of institutional insertion into the system.

3. Dichotomise by degree of violence of method.